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ABSTRACT

The development of public secondary education in one New England town is analyzed in order to lend historical perspective to current educational reform movements. This historical review shows a lack of broad public support for public secondary schools in Madison, Connecticut. Early in the 19th century, private academies provided secondary education in Connecticut. State legislation indirectly promoted this by allowing the creation of multiple school districts in each town. When Madison's private Lee Academy failed financially and required support by public funds in the 1870s, school consolidation and public support for secondary education began. However, the townspeople did not want to consolidate the town's district schools under one management. When another publicly-supported academy opened in 1884, it promoted consolidation by setting high standards for district students who sought to attend it. Early in the 20th century, state supervision brought standard curriculum to Madison schools. In addition, neighboring towns pressured Madison's school leaders to upgrade programs. Only after years of such outside influences for consolidation and standardization did citizens of Madison consent to the concept of comprehensive public secondary education. (Author/AV)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE TOWN OF MADISON, CONNECTICUT, 1821-1922

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE TOWN OF MADISON, CONNECTICUT, 1821-1922

Since 1972 government agencies, private educational groups such as the Educational Facilities Laboratories and the Kettering Foundation and professional societies (for example, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Education Association) have conducted numerous intensive investigations of American secondary education.[1] These studies argue that the comprehensive high school no longer adequately serves society and America's youth.

One is struck by the similarity between today's reform movement and the reform issues of the middle and late nineteenth century when reformers, school district leaders and, in many cases, the lay public were caught up in the arguments for and against the formation of public high schools. Beyond the formation of the high school itself, the issues in the late 1800's centered around questions of school organization and control of the schools, school curriculum, age grouping, grade structure, and the role of the immediate community in school affairs.[2]

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[1] Today's Education, Vol. 65, No. 3:57-72; September-October, 1976. Other Studies: Secondary Schools in a Changing Society, This We Believe, A Statement on Secondary Education. Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), 1975; The National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education, Discussion Draft, John H. Martin, Chairman. New York: Initial Teaching Alphabet Foundation, 1974; Ruth Weinstock, The Greening of the High School. New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1973; Youth: Transition to Adulthood, A Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee, James S. Coleman, Chairman. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973; The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report to the Public and the Profession, B. Frank Brown, Chairman, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973; "Conference Report on American Youth in the Mid-Seventies," Washington: (NASSP), 1972.

[2] Orwin Bradford Griffen. The Evolution of the Connecticut State School System. New York: Teachers College Press, 1928, pp. 176-217. Elmer Ellsworth Brown. The Making of Our Middle Schools. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902, pp. 279-322, Albert Van Dusen, Connecticut. New York: Random House, 1961, pp. 348-351. John S. Brubacher. A History of the Problems of Education. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947, pp. 395-402.

The dialogue in today's reform movement, however, lacks historic perspective. Some important questions have not been asked. For example, what were the arguments of the past which relate to and perhaps help explain today's high school reform issues? What can we learn from yesterday's answers regarding the organization, function and curriculum of America's early high schools? An historic analysis and understanding of the forces which shaped the founding and development of public responsibility for secondary education is needed if today's reform movement is to have meaning.

It would seem that few of the present reform studies give an adequate analysis of the historic issues present at the creation of the American high school. And while it may be argued that modern studies were drawn not to analyze the past but to simply reconsider the present state of the art, it also may be argued that it is difficult to reform without a clear understanding of both what exists and what has been. By failing to look at the historical development of the secondary school, the reform movement may well be perpetuating a myth, the myth that the American high school began with and always had public support.

Since the turn of the century, historians of American secondary education have tended to explain the origin of the high school as an essentially egalitarian phenomenon, which developed out of the elitism of the academy. The most significant study, and a trend-setter in this egalitarian interpretation, was written by Elmer Brown.[3] The Brown study concluded that the academy period (roughly the Revolutionary War era to the Civil War period) served as a transition between colonial society and modern democracy. The academy served the well-to-do but could not serve the needs of Americans at large. Therefore, enter the public high school.

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[3]Brown, op. cit.

Brown and two of his contemporaries, Steiner[4] and Griffin,[5] all saw the academy as an essentially private and elitist institution. In their interpretation of the work of nineteenth-century reformers such as Connecticut's own Henry Barnard, the state policy of reform in education was a two-fold effort to consolidate the district schools and then gradually encourage towns to create public high schools to replace private academies which were beyond state control. The analysis of academies as elite schools appeared as late as 1962 in Bingham's[6] multi-volume history of Connecticut.

Historic interpretation began to shift with Reed[7] who described the academy as a transitional institution which was not elitist because, among other things, it charged fees that were often low enough to allow almost anyone who wanted to attend. Sizer[8] argued that the academy ended not because it was elitist and undemocratic but because, as an essentially rural institution, it no longer could serve the industrialized and urbanized America of the post Civil War era. Katz[9] further attacked the egalitarian interpretation of the formation of the high school by showing that New England townspeople did not all flock to support the new high school as one might expect given the egalitarian interpretation.

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[4]Bernard C. Steiner. The History of Education in Connecticut. Contribution to American Educational History Series, Vol. 14, Herbert B. Adams, ed. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, 1893.

[5]Griffin, op. cit.

[6]Harold J. Bingham. History of Connecticut. Vol. 2, New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1962, pp. 540-542.

[7]Harvey S. Reed. The Period of the Academy in Connecticut, 1780-1850. Doctoral Thesis. New Haven: Yale University, 1942, pp. 221-223.

[8]"The Academies: An Interpretation," in The Age of the Academies, Theodore R. Sizer, editor. New York: Teachers College, pp. 44-46.

[9]Michael B. Katz. The Irony of Early School Reform. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.

According to Theodore R. Sizer[10] a detailed study of the academy movement has yet to be written. Sizer has concluded that the most well known academies were probably the least representative members of the movement. Histories of Andover, Exeter and similar prestigious institutions do not explain the history of the six thousand lesser academies which flourished in the nineteenth century. The fate of those institutions generally followed one of three courses. They gradually lost local support and closed their doors; they specialized even further and became very selective college preparatory schools; or, they were gradually taken over by the public and transformed into public high schools.[11] The question for the researcher, therefore, seems to be, "What was the experience of the more typical early academies and public secondary schools?"

The purpose of this study was to answer that question and investigate the process by which one town, Madison, Connecticut, took over a private and specialized academy and gradually converted it into a comprehensive public high school. Research into Madison's school history provided an opportunity to study the historiographical question of democracy and the formation of the American public high school. Specifically, the research examined questions about how Madison was influenced by her neighbors and by the state as the town took on the responsibility of providing public secondary education. Questions regarding changes in school supervision and curriculum development were asked in the context of district school consolidation, a process of physically and politically combining district schools into fewer and even larger administrative units.

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[10]Sizer, op. cit., pp. 1-48

[11]Ibid.

The selection of Madison as a site for this study was based on several considerations. Madison was typical of many Connecticut and New England towns whose public high schools trace their start to local, private academies and suburban Madison today is characteristic of many towns in America that maintain comprehensive high schools. It was felt that research conclusions found in this setting could be generalized to many similar New England towns that are engaged in the current high school reform dialogue. It was decided that the research questions could best be served by selecting a town whose educational history demonstrated a continuous and direct line between the early, private and specialized schools and the later, public and comprehensive high school. A preliminary study of several Connecticut towns known to have had early academies showed that Madison fit the requirement.

Madison also proved to be rich in documentary materials. Minute books of the Board of Education, Town Meetings and Selectman Meetings plus the minutes of trustee meetings of Madison's Daniel Hand Academy and the records of private schools in neighboring Guilford and Clinton provided countless references to the research questions. Manuscript collections were critical to this study. The Evarts family collection of Madison historical records, the Mortimer A. Warren manuscript collection in the Connecticut Historical Society and the Samuel P. Willard Collection of Connecticut School Documents in the Connecticut State Library were used extensively.

The Connecticut State Library contains a complete collection of the Annual Town Reports of Madison for the years 1880 to 1922. These public records, which included the yearly reports of school visitors, were found to be especially revealing about annual school statistics and descriptions of curriculum development in the common schools and the public secondary schools of Madison.

A background review of the history of secondary education statewide in Connecticut done in connection with this study led to several obvious conclusions.

During the nineteenth century, secondary education manifested itself in three types of schools. By the turn of the nineteenth century, high schools had become the dominant form of secondary schooling replacing both earlier forms.

Ironically, state legislation was responsible for delaying the creation of public high schools. In allowing the creation of multiple school districts in each town, the state encouraged localism. As might be expected, these small districts did not want to give up any of their power to any town-wide public high school. Local districts, furthermore, were strengthened in this position by the sale of Connecticut's western reserve lands. The profits from these sales went to establish a special fund and the interest from this fund went to the support of the numerous local districts. The enactment of laws relieving towns of the legal necessity of maintaining public high schools further contributed to retarding the growth of public high schools. As a result, people turned to private academies.

For the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the private academy was the popular form of secondary education in Connecticut. Sometime in the 1880's the public high school replaced the private academy. Some academies gradually converted to public high schools, though some academies continue today as highly specialized college preparatory schools. Most of the nineteenth century academies simply closed because as essentially rural institutions, they could no longer serve a rapidly urbanizing world. The decline of academies paralleled the growth of cities in New England and Connecticut.

During the entire period under study, the state never fully seized numerous opportunities to legislate educational directions or to even firm guidelines for the towns to follow. By abolishing school societies (small local predecessors of school districts) in 1856, the state hoped that the many

districts in each town would eventually consolidate, organize their schools by grades and somehow evolve a district public high school. In short, the state had no master plan. Reform was left to the districts.

In the absence of state leadership, the small towns of Connecticut, including Madison, were left to their own devices. In Madison reform had begun by 1821. Prior to 1821, Madison students who left after a maximum of eight years of elementary school in search of "higher" learning either as preparation for college or simply for additional experience had but two choices. They could leave town to attend an academy or they could find someone to tutor them locally. There appears to have been no formal secondary education in Madison before 1821, the year Lee Academy was established.[12]

School consolidation and public support for secondary education both emerged simultaneously in Madison when in 1877 and 1878 Madison decided to raise public funds to support the financially failing private Lee Academy.[13] At this time the town also voted, but failed to pass, a resolution that would have consolidated all of the town's district schools under one town-wide management, a move which might have hastened the formation of a public high school as it had in other Connecticut towns.[14] It was significant that Madison residents recognized

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[12]Lee was a local sea captain hero during the Revolutionary War. He and others incorporated an academy in 1825, but instruction had actually begun four years earlier. See Resolves and Private Laws of the State of Connecticut, From the Year 1789 to the Year 1836, Vol. I, Hartford: John B. Eldredge, Printer, 1837, p. 20.

[13]Madison Town Records, Town Meetings. Vol. II, 1877-1926, pp. 7, 11.

[14]Nineteenth-century school consolidation in Connecticut had two effects. When school districts came together to form one consolidated district, it generally encouraged the formation of a high school through pooled resources, an impossibility for individual districts. On the other hand, towns with public high schools encouraged district schools to consolidate as a way to improve the quality of elementary students who would then submit to examinations for the high school.

that they had an obligation to help provide support for their only secondary school even if it was a private school. The quasi-public status of Lee Academy continued until the opening of Hand Academy seven years later in 1884.[15]

Hand Academy was privately endowed by philanthropist and former native, Daniel Hand,[16] but it was also supported by tax dollars. It was a public high school from the start and it promoted district school consolidation by setting a high standard for district school students who sought to attend it. Of all the arguments for district school consolidation that were heard in Madison in the nineteenth century, the strongest, the most consistent, and probably the most persuasive was the argument that a good high school requires good district schools to prepare students.[17]

In the late nineteenth century, the state tried to show through statistics that Madison and other Connecticut towns were the only towns in New England not under consolidated school management. The state won few converts. Towns such as Madison may have been impressed by the state's arguments but they were more than a little suspicious of the state's motives.

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[15]Records show that the support for Lee waned in large measure because it failed to offer the broad curriculum needed in early industrial America. Lee successfully prepared students for college only, whereas the new Hand Academy offered preparation for business, teaching and other fields as well as college preparation.

[16]A native son of Madison, Daniel Hand spent most of his life in the South where he accumulated vast sums of money as a merchant. He left the bulk of his estate of over one million dollars to college scholarship funds and funds to help educate southern Blacks. A sum of $16,000 including real estate was given to Madison. George A. Wilcox. A Christian Philanthropist: A Sketch of the Life of Daniel Hand of His Benefaction to the American Missionary Association for the Education of the Colored People of the Southern States of America. New York: American Missionary Society, 1889. Howard T. Oedel, editor. Daniel Hand of Madison, 1801-1891. Madison: Madison Historical Society, 1973.

[17]Annual Report of the Selectmen and Treasurer of the Town of Madison: Together with the Acting School Visitor's Report. New Haven: Hoggson and Robinson, 1883, p. 20. (title varies between 1880 and 1923; hereafter referred to as "Madison Reports")

That suspicion was clearly demonstrated in 1902 when Madison made a last effort to reverse school consolidation and return to the district system. The town resolution was defeated, but it did show that many Madison citizens were still not certain that consolidation was good for Madison.[18] In that same year, Connecticut called a constitutional convention to redistrict power away from small towns. If it had passed, Madison would have lost some of its political power in the legislature. State attempts to redistrict were linked to state efforts to consolidate schools.[19] Both would lessen local authority. In 1902 Madison rejected redistricting in much the same way it attempted to reverse school consolidation.

After 1902 the state continued to seek ways short of legislation to get towns to consolidate. In 1917 the state prepared a comprehensive legislative plan to force consolidation. Called the Morrison Bill after its author, Henry C. Morrison, Assistant Secretary of the State Board of Education, the state proposed a single school district[20] in each town which would have ended the many small districts still current in many towns. Violent public opposition defeated the proposed measure.[21]

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[18] Madison Town Records. Town Meetings. Vol. II, 1877-1926, p. 265.

[19] Shore Line Times (Guilford, Connecticut), October 10, 1901, p. 1; October 24, 1901, p. 1.

[20] Henry C. Morrison. "Draft of a Plan for Needed Improvements in Our School System," January 15, 1919, in Connecticut School Documents; Samuel P. Willard Collection, 1919, Vol. I. Miscellaneous Documents. Hartford: Connecticut State Library, 1919, p. 14.

[21] Hartford Courant, January 3, 1919, p. 6; January 31, 1919, pp. 1, 12; February 5, 1919, p. 7; February 13, 1919, p. 1.

By 1917 the state had lost its legislative bid to force school consolidation. State education leaders next turned to their corps of rural school supervisors for help. Originally organized by Secretary of the State Board of Education (i.e. Commissioner), Charles Hine in 1903, to bring professional supervision and curriculum leadership to towns who requested state help, this group was under orders from the Secretary to work toward elimination of district schools.

By electing state supervision, towns usually eliminated a number of school officials, the most important of whom were the acting school visitors.[22] Frequently these school visitors were people of exceptional talent and energy in whom the public had faith. Very often acting school visitors were professionals in their own right. They were people who would willingly serve long hours in capacities which today would be labelled "superintendent," "principal," "department chairman," and "school board member." Most of all, acting school visitors served as a conscience for the town as can be seen in their annual reports to the town on attendance, teacher performance and the frequent lack of parental involvement in school affairs.

In Madison, given that their intuition was frequently their only guide, the acting school visitors were often outstanding educational leaders. One obvious shortcoming of this leadership was that it represented no systematic approach to Madison's school problems. Visitors appeared concerned about problems peculiar to their own personal interests, which at any given time

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[22] The school visitor was appointed by the town school committee to oversee the district schools within the town, examine and approve teachers and generally supervise instruction. Visitors also distributed money. Madison Town Records. Town Meetings, Vol. I, 1826-1877, p. 425.

might not have been Madison's biggest school problem.[23] To their credit, the visitors consolidated the district schools, established a public high school and, were working hard to improve curriculum before state supervision came to Madison in 1912.

State supervision brought a system to Madison schools. Curriculum development became an orderly process based no longer on the whim of a particular citizen but on guidelines developed by the state. The correspondence between Secretary Charles Hine and one of his key supervisors, Mortimer A. Warren[24] illustrates how the state carefully worked through these highly professional supervisors to gradually effect changes at the local level which were impossible to effect through legislation. Their skill, dedication, sense of loyalty and sense of humor is a refreshing chapter in the annals of Connecticut school history. The state's system of rural school supervision was an effective tool of school reform.

Outside influence on Madison's school development was not limited to that of the state. Madison's neighboring towns exerted considerable pressure on the town's school leaders to upgrade programs, especially at the high school level. Among Madison's neighbors, Clinton's Morgan High School was by far the most well endowed, the best staffed and the school with the broadest curriculum. Morgan's very high standard served as a mirror of excellence for Guilford's Institute and Madison's Hand Academy in the late nineteenth

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[23]One observes that during a doctor's tenure as acting school visitor, the schools became very concerned about health education and the spread of disease. The acting school visitor leadership of a local minister brought a heightened concern for moral education.

[24]Mortimer A. Warren Collection. Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut.

and early twentieth centuries.[25]

Evidence shows no conscious effort on the part of Madison to promote formal interaction. Nevertheless, secondary education in Madison was influenced very much by what its neighboring towns did. Madison looked to the state, but it also looked to its neighbors for guidance. The most important guidance came in the form of required curriculum development. As a two-year institution, until the turn of the century, Madison prepared students for neighboring four-year Morgan School. Madison's high school had to conform to the demands of the Morgan School curriculum.

As the town took total control of secondary education, the curriculum of Hand Academy changed. The people most responsible for the direction of curriculum development were the acting school visitors. This study concluded that the visitors began to influence curriculum development as soon as the town began supporting Lee Academy. Direct control of curriculum development, however, began with the opening of Hand Academy, Madison's first fully public secondary school.

The new academy-high school had a dramatic curricular effect on the district schools who had to improve their own curricula in order to properly prepare youngsters who wished to enter Hand Academy. The acting school visitors, without any particular training, attempted to manage the overall development of curriculum which was a difficult task until the adoption of consolidated school management in 1897.

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[25]The three shoreline towns shared common economic as well as historic ties. Each town benefited from generous endowments by local sons and daughters that helped accelerate the development of public high schools in their towns. Shore Line Sentinel (Guilford, Connecticut), June 27, 1878; Records of the Guilford Institute, Guilford, Connecticut, pp, 78-79.

In looking at the history of the evolution of Madison's public secondary schools, there is precious little evidence to support the historical argument begun by Elmer Brown and Orwin Griffon that public high schools were born out of a rejection of private academy elitism. The public high school evolved gradually from a failing private academy in Madison. The public high school came to Madison only when sufficient private endowment induced public support. Without private money and the constart prodding by the state, a public high school would have been delayed even longer.

Several factors in Madison's experience contribute to debunking the myth that the public high school was a thoroughly democratic revolt against the private academy. Lee Academy was not created to serve only the wealthy few. Local citizens who could pay the small fee, could, and did, send their children to Lee. Additionally, when the public support of Lee was first proposed, it was defeated. One would have assumed from the current reform literature that when given an opportunity to support a public high school, Madison residents would have rallied. They did not. Even with heavy private endowment for a second high school, Hand Academy, considerable public opposition was heard. These findings support the recent research of Theodore Sizer and Michael Katz who concluded that the public high school movement never had complete public support.

Madison's experience provides data for the school consolidation issue. The state claimed less expensive, more efficient and better quality schools would come through school consolidation. Available data in Madison did not substantiate that claim. Madisonians gave up their local district prerogatives when they agreed to school consolidation. What they received was single unified management. The state had to admit that consolidated schools were no less expensive but it never proved increased efficiency much less improved

quality. Madison gave up direct, local and democratic control of their district schools for very questionable returns.

Just as the school consolidation issue rages today in parts of the country so too does the question of the reform of the secondary school. One lesson from Madison's experience must be that towns should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of any reform venture very carefully to determine the relative merits of that given reform.

Today's high school reform literature argues for other ways to bring young people through adolescence besides the four year academic high school. The comprehensive high schools which began in towns like Madison are now being questioned. Before towns give up what they have, they need to carefully consider the advantages of what will replace it. Although the towns of nineteenth century Connecticut had assumed that school consolidation would bring certain desired returns, the proof remained elusive.

The current debate on high school reform remains largely in the hands of professional educators who have kept their discussions cloistered in journals and society meetings. If high school reform is to be realized, it must be brought to the public. In the absence of twentieth-century equivalents of state agents and active reform oriented state departments of education, which in the nineteenth century directed school reform, changes in secondary education will have to come from other sources.

If there is a lesson to be learned from Connecticut's experience in school reform it must be that reform cannot be legislated without thorough public support. Not only must reform issues become a topic of public debate, but the leaders of educational societies must take the lead in finding ways to make those topics public. Today, not unlike the situation in nineteenth-century Madison, the public has a good idea about what is wrong with the schools; it

understands very little about how they could be reformed.

Among the reforms we hear suggested today is the call for a return to small and highly specialized high schools which would replace the typical comprehensive high school. Madison's Lee Academy was originally very highly specialized. It was meant to prepare young people for college. It failed because it did not adjust to the changing curricular needs of the time. Madison's Hand Academy met the curricular needs of the time through a series of curriculum reforms. By 1922 Madison High School was a thoroughly comprehensive school which offered many curricular alternatives. Research in Madison leads one to conclude that whatever reforms are brought to secondary schools, they must conform to the needs of the time if they are to be successful.

Perhaps Madison's past is not an appropriate model for today. Perhaps the past can never be a model. Nevertheless, educational reformers can ill afford to ignore the past or allow past myths to replace modern realities. A healthy number of Madison and Connecticut residents never supported the reforms of school consolidation and the formation of public high schools. Some of the current reform literature on the American high school would suggest otherwise. We are frequently led to believe by those studies that in the beginning, in the nineteenth century, Americans generally rallied behind the reform of secondary education including the concept of public financing. Such was not the case and when the public did come around to support those reforms, it was more for reasons economic than philosophic.

Additional local history should be encouraged to determine how other communities met their challenge of providing public secondary education. As Theodore Sizer has suggested, the history of education has yet to be thoroughly studied by historians. Since much of the story of educational reform has been a local community phenomenon, it will only be through local historic case studies that the truth about our early institutions will emerge.

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